

7. A PROBLEM FOR HARMAN'S MORAL RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT. Gilbert Harman's defense of moral relativism is distinctive because it is grounded upon a fundamental theory of moral obligation, and not merely upon certain well-known anthropological facts (e.g., cultural diversity). Harman's theory of moral obligation is a particular form of "internalism"—roughly, that to *have* a moral obligation, one must have some adequate motivation (either dispositional or occurrent) to observe such constraints on action. It is argued, in the present piece, that Harman's version of internalism fails to account for the sense of using common moral judgments for the purposes of moral education (there is, in other words, a relativism that exists between those with more complex moralities and those who are just learning moral ideas). But this use of moral judgments seems to be crucial in moral education. Since this is so, this difficulty poses an important anomaly to Harman's relativistic moral theory.

The theory of moral relativism has been with us for a good many years. The theory has usually been proposed in the context of cultural anthropology. However, in recent years, Gilbert Harman has presented a form of moral relativism which is distinctive in that it does not rest upon the *fact* of cultural diversity.¹ As we shall see, according to Harman, there is a certain class of important moral judgments which demand a relativistic reading in virtue of their inherent "logical form". In other words, the conditions which are necessary in order to make such judgments *sensible* cannot be satisfied without at the same time requiring a relativistic account regarding those judgments. In this paper, I will examine this form of moral relativism and clarify the basis upon which it is founded. I will argue that at its root lies a theory of moral obligation which has the unfortunate consequence of denying the legitimacy or sense of a certain class of moral judgments which seems essential—viz., that class of judgments having to do with the moral education and instruction of children. Since the relativism is an implication of this theory of obligation, the doubt that is cast upon this theory of obligation by its inability to account for this class of moral judgments has the effect of undermining the plausibility of the moral relativism. However, in order

to see how this is so it is necessary to begin with a presentation of the rudiments of his theory of moral obligation and why it is that it implies moral relativism.

I

Harman restricts his relativism to a certain class of moral judgments which he calls "inner judgments". Such judgments are those which state that some *person* ought or ought not to act in a certain way, or that it is right or wrong *of that person* to do so.² Inner judgments are specifically directed to persons and are concerned only with what Harman calls the moral "ought to do" (cf. *MRD*, 192). This is a restricted class of moral judgments because not all judgments containing the word "ought" concern the moral "ought to do". Harman mentions the "ought of expectation" which pertains to such statements as "They ought to be here soon". There is also an "ought of rationality" which has to do primarily with matters of prudence such as the fact that a killer "ought" to load his gun, given that he wants to use it in the task to which he is committed. In neither of these kinds of "ought" judgments do we have a case of a specifically *moral* ought.

There is, however, one class of cases where the "ought" is normative but which is not the same as the moral "ought to do". This is the case of the evaluative "ought to be" (cf. *MRD*, 192; *NM*, 85-7; *RE*, 116). Instead of telling some person what he or she ought morally to do, such judgments state that something ought or ought not to be the case. Examples of this would be the statements that "It ought to be the case that there is more love in the world" or that "It ought not to be the case that people go around killing other people". The judgment, in such cases, expresses an evaluation of certain types of actions or states of affairs. It does not include any reference to particular *agents*.

Harman states that "The normative 'ought to be' is used to assess a situation; the moral 'ought to do' is used to describe a relation between an agent and a type of act that he might perform or has performed" (*MRD*, 192). The relation here seems to be one of *moral obligation*. With regard to future actions of particular agents, such judgments are characteristically used to state that those agents are under a moral obligation to do such actions—i.e., they are morally "bound" to perform them. When used with reference to past actions of particular agents, such judgments state that such agents *were* or *were not* under such moral obligations with regard to such actions. Hence, inner judgments (as judgments of the moral "ought to do") function essentially as "action-guiding" judgments. This is so even with regard to past actions because true judgments regarding such actions can often provide guidance regarding the moral obligations pertaining to one's future actions. In this way they are useful in the process of moral education. In any case, it would seem that inner judgments, as judgments of moral obligation, are quite important elements of our moral discourse. And such judgments are, according to Harman, inherently relativistic in virtue of their "logical form".

The "logical form" of the "ought" involved in inner judgments is characterized as a four-place operator—"Ought (A,D,C,M)"—which relates an agent A, a type of act D, considerations C, and motivating attitudes M (cf. *MRD*, 194). This means

"roughly that, given that A has motivating attitudes M and given C, D is the course of action for A that is supported by the best reasons" (*MRD*, 195). By "considerations" Harman means certain general moral claims which are to be considered in deciding what one ought to do. The relation (or "relativity") to such considerations "can be brought out by considering what are sometimes called statements of prima-facie obligation. 'Considering that you promised, you ought to go to the board meeting, but considering that you are the sole surviving relative, you ought to go to the funeral; all things considered, it is not clear what you ought to do'" (*MRD*, 194). Harman states, however, that *this* relativity to "considerations" is not what makes his theory relativistic since any moral theory must make some reference to such considerations.

The "motivating attitudes" referred to in the characterization of the logical form of inner judgments are regarded as being "reasons" for acting which are said to have their source in the agent's own goals, desires, intentions, etc. (cf. *MRD*, 193-4). Thus, the "logical form" of such judgments implies that it is impossible for an agent to be morally obligated to do some act unless he or she, in fact, has some *motive* to do it. Motivation, in other words, is thought to be included within the logical form of the judgments of moral obligation. This position regarding the essential relation between motivation and moral obligation has come to be called "internalism"; and, as we shall see, it is this relativity to "motivating attitudes" that plays an essential role in generating the relativism which Harman claims to be associated with inner judgments.³

Inner judgments have two important characteristics. First, they imply that the agent has reasons (i.e., motivating attitudes) to do the act in question, and second, that the one making the judgment endorses such reasons and supposes his audience does also (cf. *MRD*, 193). In order to fully understand Harman's relativism, as it pertains to inner judgments, the importance of these two characteristics must be shown.

A key to this is provided, I think, in Harman's attempt to account for certain standard elements of a traditional concept of morality. In "Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics" these elements are represented as constituting the "naive view" of morality for which Harman's theory is intended to be a relativistic substitute. He characterizes the "naive view" as follows:

First, it says that there are certain basic moral demands that everyone accepts or at least has reasons to accept; let me refer to this as the claim that morality is "nonrelative". Second, these demands are supposed to be accepted as demands on everyone; they are to have universal application. I will refer to this as the claim that morality is "universal". Third, these demands are supposed to be the source of all moral reasons for agents to do things; I will refer to this as the claim that morality is "agent centered" or, sometimes, that it "takes the point of view of an agent" rather than a critic. In the naive view, then, morality is nonrelative, universal, and agent centered (*RE*, 109).

The first characteristic of inner judgments (*viz.*, that they imply that the agent has reasons to do the act in question) seems to be intended as an account of the "agent cen-

tered" aspect of the "naive" view of morality. The second characteristic of inner judgments (*viz.*, that the one making the judgment endorses such reasons and supposes his audience does also) is intended, I think, to account for an important aspect of the universality inherent in the "naive" view of morality—*viz.*, its "intersubjectivity".

The importance of agent-centricity has to do with the very *meaning* of the moral "ought" contained in inner judgments. Harman states that we make inner judgments about a person "only if we suppose that he is capable of being motivated by the relevant moral considerations" (*MRD*, 190). According to Harman, moral ought judgments made without this supposition sound "odd". He describes a number of cases where this oddity is said to appear. For example, consider the case of a contented employee of Murder, Inc. who was raised as a child to honor and respect members of the "family" but to have nothing but contempt for the rest of society. His current assignment is to kill a certain bank manager, Bernard J. Ortcutt. Harman states that "in this case, it would be a misuse of language to say of him that he ought not to kill Ortcutt or that it would be wrong of him to do so, since that would imply that our own moral considerations carry some weight with him, which they do not" (*MRD*, 191). Another example is that "it sounds odd to say that Hitler should not have ordered the extermination of the Jews, that it was wrong of him to have done so. That sounds somehow 'too weak' a thing to say" (*MRD*, 192). He says that the oddity or weakness of such a judgment does not lie in the fact that what Hitler did was so enormous or horrendous, but "because we suppose that in acting as he did he shows that he could not have been susceptible to the moral considerations on the basis of which we make our judgment" (*MRD*, 192). He was, in other words, "beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations" (*MRD*, 193). Harman seems to be assuming that the point of making such judgments is to have an effect in determining the actions of the individuals involved. Thus, when it is evident that the pertinent moral considerations have no connection to the motivational background of some particular individual (*i.e.*, his or her goals, desires, intentions, etc.), it would seem that the application of such judgments to that individual would lose its point and, hence, its meaningfulness. The "oddity" in such cases is manifested, and this demonstrates a misuse of the moral "ought" (*cf. RE*, 111). Therefore, the importance of "agent-centricity" in Harman's theory arises out of a concern to maintain the *sense* of moral ought judgments.

However, if the appeal to "agent-centricity" was all that was involved in specifically *moral* judgment it would be essentially a personal or subjective affair. Harman notes that a morality that is solely grounded upon such inherently subjective reasons is counter-intuitive. This is because:

. . . we are ordinarily inclined to suppose that a person's intentions, aims, goals, plans, and projects are one sort of thing and morality is another. We do not ordinarily suppose that right and wrong are determined by a particular individual's decisions and principles. We are inclined to think that morality has an external source, not an internal one (*NM*, 92).

Morality, according to this intuition (which Harman shares), is essentially public or social. The "universality" element of the "naive" view of morality captures this idea. Although this condition can be viewed as making the positive claim that moral demands are by their very nature applicable to all moral agents, the universality condition can also be taken to include a negative claim that moral demands (*qua* moral) cannot be grounded solely upon the *personal* or *subjective* desires, goals, intentions, etc. of particular individuals. The grounds for such judgments, in other words, must at least be *intersubjective*. This condition, imposed by the universality requirement inherent in the "naive" view of morality, is the aspect which the second characteristic of inner judgments presented by Harman is intended to satisfy. It is, in fact, what distinguishes the specifically *moral* ought from the simple ought of *rationality*. Recall that the ought of rationality is essentially a matter of prudence. A bank robber "ought" (in this sense) to use the back door, given that he wants to gain his intended result. Like judgments of the *moral* ought to do, the ought of rationality has an essential connection to motivational reasons. The difference according to Harman, "is that when we use the 'ought' of rationality to say that P ought to do D, we are not necessarily endorsing P's doing D, but, when we use the moral 'ought' to say that P ought to do D, we are (normally) endorsing P's doing D . . . When I use the moral 'ought', I presuppose that the agent and my audience accept certain practical principles that I also accept, and I make my judgment relative to those principles" (*NM*, 122-23). Thus, moral judgments (*qua* moral) necessarily presuppose at least some extent of intersubjective acceptance of the reasons grounding such judgments. For, without this aspect, they are not full-fledged *moral* judgments.

Harman presents his theory as a form of a "social convention" theory of morality.⁴ In this view, only moral demands that are products of (implicit) agreements among moral agents are deemed bona fide moral demands. According to this view, agreements regarding various moral demands are arrived at by a process of implicit social bargaining. This does two things for Harman's theory. First, it assures that bona fide moral demands will always have the necessary motivational background demanded by his internalistic conception of agent-centricity. The motivational reasons to adhere to such demands are found in the actual *intentions* on the part of the agents to keep such agreements—on the condition that others similarly intend (cf. *MRD*, 194). The intentions to adhere to such agreements are, of course, a necessary aspect of there *being* such (sincere) agreements. So, any sincere (although, implicit) agreements constituting legitimate moral demands will also necessarily include the motivational background assumed to be essential for the existence of moral obligations. Second, the social convention theory explains how the two elements of agent-centricity and intersubjectivity can be taken into account in a consistent manner. The social convention theory's reliance upon mutual agreement clearly satisfies the condition of intersubjectivity. Only those demands which are products of such intersubjective agreement are held to be legitimate moral demands. But since such agreement is also an agreement to adhere to demands that each agent actually accepts (or has motivating reasons to accept), such demands will also satisfy the condition of agent-centricity.

It is at this point that the relativistic aspect of Harman's theory becomes apparent. He has escaped subjectivism by an appeal to social conventions, and the

shared intentions to adhere to them. As he states, "The tacit convention theory . . . sees moral principles as principles for which the source is both internal and external . . . The private principles of one person, which that person does not take to be shared by others, do not represent a normal case of moral principles. At best, they represent a limiting case" (*NM*, 112). Thus, *moral* judgments pertaining to the actions of various particular agents will be legitimately made only with respect to agreements (i.e., conventions) to which those agents are a party. But there is nothing that prohibits such social agreements or conventions regarding specific moral demands from being widely diverse. Harman believes that "for any such demand, someone might fail to accept it without having failed to see the consequences of his or her options, and without being in any way irrational . . . If his or her principles and interests diverge sufficiently from yours, it may well happen that he or she has no reason to accept your morality" (*RE*, 110).⁵ Because not all moral agents have motivational backgrounds supporting intentions to adhere to agreements regarding the same moral demands, not all moral agents will be (legitimately) susceptible to judgments made on the basis of the same demands. Legitimate moral judgments concerning the actions of some particular agent that are made relative to one set of moral conventions (to which the agent agrees, or has reasons to agree) will not be legitimate relative to some other set of moral conventions (to which the agent does not agree, or has no reasons to agree). In this sense the theory of moral judgment, and the grounds upon which such judgment is based, is inherently relativistic.

II

It has been shown how Harman's relativism derives from an analysis of the essential characteristics pertaining to judgment of the so-called moral "ought to do"—i.e., judgments of moral obligation. As such, his relativistic theory is grounded upon his theory of moral obligation. If the plausibility of his moral relativism is to be adequately assessed, it is necessary that this theory of obligation be examined more closely. It is my contention that, on closer inspection, the underlying theory of obligation must be regarded as seriously problematic. This, in turn, will pose a serious problem for his relativism.

According to Harman, an important part of the "logical form" of judgments of moral obligation is that there is an essential relation between motivation and obligation. The logical form "Ought (A,D,C,M)" expresses this relation. The element "M", as we have seen, refers to the presence within the agent of "motivating attitudes" without which the "ought" does not apply to that agent. It has been noted that this position regarding the relation between motivation and obligation has been called "internalism". My comments regarding Harman's theory of obligation will largely focus on the adequacy of maintaining this "internalistic assumption"—especially as it relates to judgments of moral obligation in the *particular* case. I will begin by examining, in more detail, this important idea of "motivation".

There is a distinction to be made between "occurrent" and "dispositional" motivations. We can have certain general motivational dispositions to do certain things that are quite different from those motivations that we actually have in partic-

ular situations. For instance, it can be the case that I truly have a dispositional motive of liking to eat ice cream, but that does not mean that this general disposition must always have effect in the particular case. Even though I may, on a certain occasion, pass up an opportunity to eat ice cream, this in no way affects, or disconfirms, my general disposition of liking to eat ice cream. In such a case, I may not have an *occurrent* motive to eat ice cream although I do still have the general *dispositional* motive of doing so.

The distinction between occurrent and dispositional motivations can also be applied, it seems, to specifically *moral* demands. Recall that the fundamental motivational attitudes of which Harman speaks are *intentions* to adhere to certain tacit agreements regarding various moral demands or principles. On this view, one can truly have the dispositional intention to adhere to an implicit social agreement to refrain from telling lies (on the condition that others similarly intend), and yet find oneself in a particular situation where one's occurrent motive (for whatever reason) runs contrary to the general direction of the dispositional one. One can say "I fully have the (dispositional) intention to refrain from telling lies in general (i.e., in most cases), but yet, my overriding (occurrent) intention in this particular situation is *not* to do so." Perhaps the stakes in the present situation of not telling the lie are deemed by the agent to be too great. The occurrent motive, for example, to get oneself out of an embarrassing or threatening situation has, in that situation, overcome the general dispositional motive to refrain from telling lies. Even though this may happen in the particular case, one may still have the *general disposition* to refrain from telling lies.

With this in mind, the question arises as to whether the motivational element which Harman deems necessary for moral obligation is to be cast as dispositional, occurrent, or some combination of both. Textual evidence seems to suggest that the relevant motivations are viewed as being primarily dispositional. The *intentions* regarding the adherence to certain social conventions which provide the motivational basis for moral obligations seem to have this dispositional character.

In a passage explicating his use of the word "intention" Harman states that:

I will use the word "intention" in a somewhat extended sense to cover certain dispositions or habits. Someone may habitually act in accordance with the relevant understanding and therefore may be disposed to act in that way without having any more or less conscious intention. In such a case it may sound odd to say that he *intends* to act in accordance with the moral understanding. Nevertheless, for present purposes I will count that as his having the relevant intention in a dispositional sense (MRD, 196).

Although this passage seems to leave open the possibility that Harman allows the word "intention" to maintain its "occurrent" sense, the character of the type of moral judgment to which his theory of obligation is intended to apply seems to demand a dispositional reading of the motivating "intentions". Recall that when Harman distinguishes the normative "ought to be" from the moral "ought to do" he states that the normative "ought to be" is used to assess a situation; the moral "ought

to do" is used to describe a relation between an agent and a type of act that he might perform or has performed" (MRD, 192). It is important to note that Harman's description of the use of judgments of the moral "ought to do" only refers to judgments regarding the relation (presumably, of obligation) between an agent and certain *types* of act. This is important because it seems to show that Harman intends to cast his theory of obligation at a rather general level. That is, the theory of obligation is primarily intended to analyze the grounds for making *general* judgments of the type "You ought to keep your promises" rather than *particular* judgments such as "You ought, in this situation, to keep your promise".⁶ But if this is so, then it seems that the motivational grounds for such (general) obligations must be cast as dispositional. It is impossible to ground a general obligation regarding a type of act (i.e., an obligation which holds "generally") upon occurrent motivations. This is because the scope of the occurrent motivation (as far as its "motivational effect" goes) extends only to the immediate situation. Only dispositional motives have a general motivational effect extending beyond particular situations. Hence, if Harman's theory of obligation is primarily a theory of *general* obligations, and if the theory is to uphold its "internalistic" assumption, then it is proper to rely primarily upon dispositional motives.

Of course, it is extremely important that a theory of moral obligation account for *particular* obligations. Without being able to do so the theory would be seriously lacking because it is in the particular case that any general obligations come into effect. We want to know what it is we ought to do in the *particular* situation confronting us. In this way, a theory of moral obligation provides for moral guidance. The general obligations provide us with "prima facie" moral considerations to be taken into account in determining the moral status of our immediate individual actions. The general obligations are essentially presumptions that are to be referred to in determining one's actual or particular obligations. But, it is the judgment regarding the *particular* situation that is ultimately most important. Hence, it seems to be essential that a theory of moral obligation provide for an effective transfer of the general obligation to the particular case.

I believe Harman wants to apply his theory of moral obligation to obligations pertaining to the particular case (his explicit comments regarding the *general* character of such moral judgments notwithstanding). For instance, the example having to do with the member of Murder, Inc., who's present assignment is to kill one Bernard J. Ortcutt is cast in terms of a particular action—the killing of Mr. Ortcutt. It is to be noted that the moral judgment pertaining to this action that the member of Murder, Inc. ought not to kill Ortcutt is *not* a description of a moral obligation relating a particular agent and a *type* of act that he might perform. This cannot be viewed, in any way, as an act-type. Rather, it is the particular act of killing Mr. Ortcutt. Does Harman, then, wish to extend his theory of obligation to *particular* cases? It seems so. This is precisely what seems to be intended in presenting this as an example which is (presumably) relevant to the theory he goes on to propose. The problem, however, is that it is not clear how well Harman's *internalist* theory of moral obligation can be applied to judgments pertaining to the *particular* case.

Given Harman's internalist theory of obligation, the question arises whether the motivational grounds for judgments of obligation in the *particular* case are to be considered as occurrent or dispositional. Are we to hold that the obligation of the member of Murder, Inc. is dependent upon the *occurrent* motivation that he or she has at the time of the proposed act, or are we to suppose that the obligation motivationally depends upon the member's general dispositional motivations? If it is held that the obligation (or lack of such) motivationally depends solely upon the occurrent motivation, then we have the problem of making any sense of the idea of "obligation". A major part of this notion is that the agent is somehow "bound" as a matter of duty to perform the act in question. This implies some substantial level of (moral) constraint upon the agent's action. If the alleged particular obligations motivationally depend upon the agent's occurrent motivation at the time of the proposed act, then it seems that in any case where compliance with the moral demand is such that it would be contrary to such motivation, the agent would then be excused from the moral demand. For, there would be no relevant motivation that would effectively provide the motivational support necessary for the obligation. But, to allow obligations in the particular case to depend so intimately on such occurrent motivation would make a sham of the "binding" nature inherent in the notion of obligation. The theory would be lax because the grounds for exemption or excuse would be too wide. All that one would need in order to be excused or exempted from some alleged obligation is the simple fact that the demand of the obligation did not fit into one's motivational background of interests, desires, goals, intentions, etc., at the time of the proposed act. But this would surely be an absurd and essentially vacuous notion of "obligation".

Suppose, then, that we hold that obligations in the particular case depend ultimately upon dispositional motivation. This seems to be Harman's position. In such a view, it is possible to account for cases where the agent in question can still be morally obligated to perform some act even though his or her occurrent motivation does not support it. Rather, it is held that the general dispositional intention to adhere to the moral demand is enough to put the agent within the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations. This remains the case even though, on a particular occasion, the agent fails to have the corresponding occurrent motivation. This dispositional "capability" of being motivated by the relevant moral considerations is all that is needed, on this view, in order to make the agent susceptible to moral judgment based upon such considerations. This being so, agents cannot excuse themselves so easily from obligations in the particular case because they remain bound on the basis of their *general* intentions.

The fundamental problem with motivationally grounding obligations of the particular case solely upon dispositional motivation is that this seems too stringent. Remember, the move to grounding the obligation upon the dispositional motivation was intended to answer the problem of the extreme excusing efficacy of occurrent motivation. The recourse to dispositional motivation was to provide for a more exacting and stringent basis of obligation. The problem is that it seems to go too far toward the other extreme in not being able to admit of *any* grounds at all for excusing the agent from the general obligation in certain particular cases. Grounding particular obligations solely upon occurrent motivation seems to provide too wide of a basis for excuse, but grounding particular obligations solely upon dispositional motivations

seems to provide no basis for excuse or exception at all. Once the agent has the general intention to adhere to an agreement regarding some moral demand, if the particular obligation is based solely upon such a dispositional intention, then the agent would be bound to comply with the demand no matter what the particular circumstances might be. This would seem to be an excessively stringent system of morality.

There are two types of cases where this stringency seems to be problematic. The first has to do with the fact that there are presumably many various general demands which ground an agent's corresponding obligations. The well-known problem is that in the particular case such general grounds of obligation can, and often do, conflict. Unless there is some way to adjudicate between them in such cases, and thus relieve at least one of the conflicting obligations, the agent is faced with a pernicious moral dilemma which is incapable of resolution. The problem here is that the conflicting moral judgments in the situation, based upon the conflicting general demands, cease to function as action-guides. That is, in this particular situation, the judgments do not provide a clear determination as to what the agent should do. Since a primary function of making such judgments is that they provide such guidance, in cases where they conflict in an irresolvable manner they cease to fulfill that function. The judgments, in such situations, lose their very point. The need for some (non-arbitrary) grounds for exception from general moral demands in certain particular cases, then, arises in part from the need to maintain the very sense of making such judgments in such situations.

The second type of situation in which it would be problematic to maintain a system of obligation which did not allow for some grounds for exception or excuse from general demands is where general demands which are relevantly applicable to the particular case would demand that the agent do something that is clearly of an extremely sacrificial character. In such cases there is no question of conflicting *moral* demands, rather, the demand that is clearly applicable would, if satisfied, be extremely self-sacrificing.⁷ The problem here is that the agent would (normally) have severe problems complying with such demands in such extreme situations, and hence, would most likely (unless he or she was a saint or hero) fail to comply with the obligation. If such situations were fairly persistent in one's experience, there would naturally be a tendency to think that morality is asking too much—i.e., that it is too difficult (given one's vital interests) to maintain a morally virtuous character. A plausible result of this could be that the agent become "alienated" from morality in the sense of being prone to chafe at such stringent demands and ultimately acquire a lower respect and concern for morality itself.⁸ J.O. Urmsen speaks of this type of alienating process in the context of the problems of viewing certain "superogatory" acts as basic duties. He states:

To take a parallel from positive law, the prohibition laws asked too much of the American people and were consequently broken systematically; and as people got used to breaking the law a general lowering of respect for the law naturally followed; it no longer seemed that a law was something that everybody could be expected to obey . . . The basic moral code must not be in part too far beyond the capacity of the ordinary men on ordinary occasions, or a general

breakdown of compliance with the moral code would be an inevitable consequence; duty would seem to be something high and unattainable, and not for "the likes of us".⁹

If this is right (at least as a plausible tendency on the part of agents acting under such an excessively stringent system of morals), the demands on such a system would have an inherently self-defeating tendency. It would be a system of obligation which has an element inherently operating to make moral agents less concerned to satisfy (or *care about* satisfying) such obligations. This would seem to operate toward undermining the very purpose of a system of moral obligation itself. Hence, if this is to be precluded, it seems that some (non-arbitrary) grounds for excuse in certain extremely self-sacrificing situations must be admitted—at least as a matter of *common* (as opposed to "saintly" or "heroic") morality.

Hence, it seems that in order to have an adequate theory of moral obligation some grounds for excuse or exception must be provided. The problem with grounding obligations in the particular case upon purely dispositional motives is that it does not seem to allow for this possibility. However, there is a possible way to introduce grounds for exception and excuse into this theory. We can simply build the various grounds for exception and excuse into the general demands. For instance, instead of having the dispositional intention to adhere to the demand "Do not lie" we can rather view the dispositional intention as referring to a more qualified demand such as "Do not lie, unless it will save a life". By a process of such qualification (which could go on indefinitely) it might be said that we can ground particular obligations upon dispositional motives and yet still provide for numerous grounds of excuse. On this view, there *would* be grounds for excusing the agent from certain particular obligations. Such grounds would simply be included in the general (qualified) demand to which one has the dispositional intention to adhere. In this way a theory of obligation that is based upon an essential connection between general moral demands and dispositional motivation (such as Harman's) could provide for a middle course between the extreme laxity of grounding obligation upon occurrent motives and the extreme stringency of grounding obligation (in particular cases) upon dispositional intentions to adhere to general and *unqualified* demands. Unless Harman takes some such route, his theory of obligation (interpreted as grounding obligations upon *dispositional* intentions) will have an implausible stringency associated with it. The question is whether his theory of obligation will be adequate even if it is viewed as relying upon *qualified* demands.

One problem with the "qualified general demands" approach as it applies to Harman's theory, is that the qualifications that are to be built into the demands must inherently be highly complex if they are going to be able to provide grounds for exception or excuse to any significant degree. This is because our moral life and the situations and circumstances in which we are apt to find ourselves are themselves extremely complex. The problem is that it is highly unrealistic to hold that moral agents could have the requisite dispositional *intentions* to adhere to such complex demands. This seems to be asking too much of the epistemological and moral capacities of (human) moral agents. Hence, the usefulness of the "qualified general demands" approach to moral obligation seems to be significantly limited by the capacities of moral

agents to understand, and thus *intend* to adhere to such qualified demands. In other words, if moral obligations depend upon the shared *intentions* on the part of moral agents to adhere to certain moral demands, and if such demands must inherently be so complex that they are beyond the normal intellectual capacities of such agents, then, it seems that such agents cannot have the relevant intentions regarding those demands. It would seem to follow, on Harman's theory, that they could not be obligated on the basis of *those* (highly qualified) demands.

Harman's response to this type of charge is telling. Recall that he characterized the relevant intentions as dispositions or habits to act in accordance with certain "understandings" or "agreements" (regarding various moral demands) "without having any more or less conscious intention" (*MRD*, 196). The point is that such intentions are to be thought of as being rather *unconscious* dispositions to act in accordance with "understandings" regarding certain demands. Because of the unconscious character of the intentions it seems, at least to Harman, that the understandings concerning the demands in question do not need to be specified (at least, in any explicit and *a priori* manner). He states that "It is often possible to recognize what is in accordance with the understanding and what would violate it without being able to specify the understanding in any general way" (*MRD*, 202). He says that moral understandings are typically vague and thus it is difficult to provide a systematic account of them. But, nonetheless, we can often recognize the understandings to which we unconsciously intend to adhere. According to Harman, the vague nature of these moral understandings is alleviated to an extent in practice. He states that:

One learns what can and cannot be done in various situations. Expectations are adjusted to other expectations. But moral disputes arise nonetheless. Such disputes may concern what the basic moral agreement implies for particular situations; and, if so, that can happen either because of disputes over the facts or because of a difference in basic understanding. Moral disputes may also arise concerning whether or not changes should be made in the basic agreement (*MRD*, 202).

The point seems to be that as we become faced with various moral dilemmas and disputes, we not only become aware of our previous dispositional moral intentions, but we learn to refine them so that we are able to effect a resolution concerning such problems. As we become more experienced in moral matters, our morality becomes increasingly complex and thus better able to handle the various complications that occur in our daily lives. In this way we come to learn how to account for various grounds for exception and excuse. Hence, we do not need to know the moral complexity that allows us to do this *in advance* of our on-going moral experience. Rather, we come to know and perhaps revise our dispositional moral intentions through moral experience itself.

Harman's idea here seems to make some sense as an account of the increasing complexity one's moral views acquire as one matures. As one gains more experience in moral matters one tends to acquire a more sophisticated moral sensibility which allows for a more "discriminating" consideration of moral obligations—espe-

cially as they arise in the particular case. But this very fact has important anomalous results for Harman's theory of moral obligation. It shows that those who are not mature or experienced in moral matters (usually children who have only begun to have some capacity for moral considerations) *do not have the same morality* as those who are more mature or experienced. In other words, Harman's relativistic theory of obligation not only applies between various groups of adult moral agents who differ with regard to dispositional moral intentions. It also applies between such adult members of any such group and its children. The less experienced members of such a society or group will generally have dispositional intentions to adhere to moral demands that are much less complex than those of experienced agents. This is because, as we have just seen, moral complexity seems to be a function, in large part, of moral experience and maturity. Thus, on Harman's internalist account, the actual *obligation* of such less experienced agents (which depends so intimately upon dispositional *intentions* to adhere to various moral demands) will necessarily differ to a significant extent from those of more experienced agents. In fact, the obligations of the former will be more stringent than those of the latter because there will be, presumably, fewer grounds for excuse and exception which have been learned through on-going moral experience.

One important consequence of this is that the more experienced moral agents cannot legitimately (i.e., *sensibly*) make moral judgments (either retrospectively or prospectively) concerning the actions of those agents that are significantly less experienced. This is because they would have quite different moralities which are grounded upon the differences in the complexity of the moral demands to which they have dispositional intentions to adhere. If this is so, the more experienced moral agents are necessarily barred from using such judgments to *teach* a more complex (and less stringent) morality. However, the utilization of moral judgments in moral education seems to be essential. It is difficult to envision how the moral education and instruction of children (and those less experienced in moral matters generally) could be effected if those more experienced in such matters could not *sensibly* make moral judgments regarding their actions. To be sure, moral education does not consist solely in the utilization of explicit moral judgments. Examples and paradigmatic behavior are also quite important. However, this does not preempt the need for explicit *cognitive* instruction in this area. Moral judgment concerning the actions of such less experienced moral agents provides an explicit way in which such agents can gain a clearer idea of the morally relevant considerations to be taken into account in reasoning about their obligations when faced with certain typical situations. Thus, if Harman is right we would be unable to use moral judgments in an area where they seem to play an essential role—viz., the moral instruction of children. This is surely grounds for thinking that Harman's theory of moral obligation and judgment is suspect. For, it fails to account for moral judgments that we do make, and constantly feel the need to make.

One response to this charge is to claim that it is not true that the use of such judgments is *totally* ruled out by this theory of obligation. Rather, only "standard" uses of such judgments in this context are barred. And, the use of such judgments in moral education is precisely a "non-standard" one. Harman appears to make this sort of response at one place. He states that ". . . a speaker may *pretend* that someone is susceptible to certain moral considerations in an effort to make that person or others

susceptible to those considerations. Inner judgments about one's children sometimes have this function" (*MRD*, 193 emphasis added). The recourse to the idea of having the speaker *pretend* that the person being addressed—in this case the child—is susceptible to certain moral considerations is premised upon the fact that, according to Harman's theory, the one being addressed is *not in fact* susceptible to such considerations—at least in any *standard* way.

However, once this approach is taken in order to account for the use of moral judgments in the moral education of children, a dilemma for Harman's theory arises. If we *can* use such judgments in these contexts (albeit, in non-standard ways) in order to modify their beliefs and ultimately guide their actions, then there is nothing to stop us from using moral judgments in similar "non-standard" ways to influence the behavior and beliefs of those *adults* with whom we have moral disagreements. This is because the difficulty of using such judgments (sensibly) in the cases of adult moral disagreement is (according to Harman's theory) no different from the disagreement in dispositional intentions to adhere to various moral demands that is found between adults and children. Thus, if the problem can be solved by "non-standard" uses in the one case, it would seem to be able to provide a means of effectively using such judgments in the latter type of case. But if *this* is possible, then the important relativistic implications of Harman's theory would appear to be undermined. For, there would now be no obstacle to using moral judgments of the moral "ought to do" in order to influence the beliefs and actions of other moral agents who disagree (morally and motivationally) with us.

On the other hand, if the "non-standard" use option is regarded as being invalid (or nonsensible) with regard to adults that have basic moral and motivational disagreements with us, then this would also—for the same reason—invalidate such appeals to account for the use of such judgments in the moral education of children. Thus, the difficulty of being able to account for certain important uses of moral judgments of the "ought to do" (those having to do with moral education) will remain for Harman's theory. It appears to be difficult, on Harman's theory, to account for the effectiveness of these judgments in modifying beliefs and guiding action without at the same time opening the door to a general *nonrelativistic* account of moral obligation.

III

Harman's moral relativism is an implication of his internalistic theory of obligation. Because moral agents' dispositional intentions (i.e., motives) to adhere to moral demands can differ so widely, and because obligations are so essentially tied to such intentions, the actual obligations of various moral agents can fundamentally differ. But if there are grounds for thinking that the underlying theory of obligation is suspect, this would clearly cast a shadow of doubt over the relativism. It has been shown that Harman's internalistic theory of obligations cannot be accepted without at the same time admitting to a rather disturbing inability to use moral judgments in the education of children. Unless something is done to remedy what looks clearly to be a defect in the theory of obligation, Harman's case for moral relativism remains rather tenuous. □

ENDNOTES

¹ The works by Harman in which he presents his moral relativism are: "Moral Relativism Defended" *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), 3-22 reprinted in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, ed. by Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 189-204. All references to this work will be to the Krausz and Meiland edition and preceded by *MRD*; *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). References on this work are preceded by *NM*; "Relativistic Ethics: Morality and Politics", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978), 109-21. References to this work are preceded by *RE*; "What Is Moral Relativism"? in *Values and Morals*, ed. by A.I. Goldman and J. Kim (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), 143-61.

² Inner judgments can also refer to *past* actions of agents—i.e., judgments stating that some person ought or ought not to have acted in a certain way, or that it was right or wrong of that person to have done so. See *MRD*, 190.

³ See William K. Frankena, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy", in A.I. Melden ed., *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 40-81 for the distinction between "internalism" and "externalism" in this context.

⁴ Harman's discussion of his social convention theory shows up in many places in the writings I have been considering. See *MRD* 195-6; *RE* 114-5; and *NM*, 103-14.

⁵ Because Harman believes that it is true that there is such a *fundamental* divergence in the (rational) acceptance of moral demands, he feels compelled to reject the "nonrelative" element of the "naive" view of morality which states that there *are* certain basic moral demands that everyone accepts or at least has reasons to accept. But, because of this, he also feels compelled to at least modify or restrict the "universality" requirement of the "naive" view because he believes, as I have noted, that moral demands are only applicable to agents who have (motivating) reasons to accept them. This is why, in my discussion of Harman's attempt to account for the aspect of "universality", I emphasized the notion of "intersubjectivity". *This*, I think, is what Harman has tried to take into account in his consideration of universality. Moral demands, on this account, are *not* (strictly speaking) universally applicable, but they *are* necessarily intersubjective—i.e., they are essentially "public" and nonsubjective. In Harman's words, the range of the "everyone" referred to in the universality requirement is relativized "to those who accept or have reasons to accept certain basic moral demands" (*RE*, 113).

⁶ Whether Harman's theory of obligation is, indeed, adequately applicable to such particular judgments will be considered in a moment. For now, however, let it be supposed that Harman intends to limit his theory to *general* obligations regarding *types* of act.

⁷ Of course, this *could* be cast as a conflict between competing *moral* demands if one views certain demands of self-interest as specifically moral.

⁸ The term "alienated" as used in this context is borrowed from Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 186.

⁹ J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes", in A.I. Melden ed., *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 212.